The Vocation of Parenthood

Ephesians 5:21-6:4

May 11, 196_

Last Sunday we thought about the vocation of Christians doing all sorts of different things in the work world. We thought about the vast religious pluralism of the [illegible], and how we become the context in which we are able to live our calling.

This week, I would like for us to be thinking about what is perhaps our most common task, a vocation most of us do have in common, a responsibility that is under our control - or [illegible] under our roof. I refer, of course, to the vocation of parenthood.

[illegible] reason [illegible] about my [illegible] and [illegible] fact [illegible] benefit [illegible] I'm grateful [illegible] Richard [illegible] his children [illegible] birthday [illegible].

I [illegible] will be surprised, however, that we need a sermon on parents. I feel that [illegible] that it [illegible] to dinner on the second Sunday of May isn't going to make much difference. In addition, I feel strongly that what happens after the act of giving birth is, or ought to be, the focus of a great deal of our attention, rather than the very common fact of biological motherhood. So - it will not be a typical Mother's day sermon.

Parenthood - being a mother, or a father, is a vocation, and it focusses on the related institutions of the familoy and the home. In this context, two general observations are in order.

First, the Home - as an institution, isn't what it used to be. Two major factors of life in the 20th century are responsible - mobility - and the growth and sophistication of public institutions. While we were in Nashville several weeks ago we toured the Hermitage - Andrew Jackson's hmmestead. Jackson bought the property as a young man, built the buildings and farmed the fields. It was his home for the entirety of his life. Many of his relatives and dearest friends lived there with him. Children were born, educated, reared, married and died in the house. In the garden is a small cemetery for an astonishing number of people - buried in the ground of what was truly a home. The Hermitage is a classic example of what once was - in varying degrees - the going idea of the Home or Homestead.

That is gone now - and the type of culture in which it flourished will probably never repeat itself. Today mobility in the word. We've been in Lafayette for 2½ years, and already we've the only original residents left on our block. This doesn't need documented - particularly in this congregation - where every springtime brings the loss of many people we have learned to know and love. Mobility, simply stated, has fundamentally altered the institution of the home.

In addition the traditional functions of the home are now done by very sophisticated public institutions. The school, the church, and the scout troop - together do for a child what were once the cohesive tasks of the home. In fact, our lives get so deeply involved with these other institutions that the home becomes little more than a sleeping place for several individuals. One observer notes that, "A home ceases to be a home when most of the members are about to leave it." (E. Trueblood, Your Other Vocation, p. 87) And that statement defines most of the households I know, including my own.

My first concern, therefore, is that we make a concertdd effort to re-establish our priorities. Our families are our first and most important responsibility. And yet, to live out of that conviction is no easy thing to do. We live in a culture that operates with a different set of assumptions. All of us know someone who works terribly hard at this job- under the premise that this is the way to provide for a family - and the tragedy is that families become the victims rather than the benefactors.

Several year ago, Fortune Magazine revealed in an article the fact that several large corporations in this country do not give major responsibility to happily married men for the simple reason that this kind of man will insist on reserving both time and energy for a commitment that stands ahead of the company. That's the kind of culture in which we live - a culture that invited gross irresponsibility in our primary task, under the guise of success and security.

Let's put our priorities in order. Let's acknowledge that nothing matters so much as those we have brought into the world - that if we fail here, nothing in life can compensate us for that very final failure.

The second observation I would make is that homemaking will never be the same again. Technology has changed the rules of the game. Tasks which once took all day, every day, are now done in minutes by pushing a button or plugging in an appliance. Thus, the homemaker, has time for other things in addition to feelings of insecurity about her role as the pusher of many buttons.

A growing problem today is the young college educated wife, fluent in French, conversant in Chinese History and Baroque music, whose time is consumed in changing diapers. Our culture has held out before her the image of emancipated womanhood and she has been led to believe that her contribution to society must be made in some profession. Elton Trueblood put it this way:

"It is assumed that a person needs rigorous preparation in order to be a successful architect, but the guidance of human lives is apparently thought to be on a different intellectual level." (Ibid p. 89)

I had the privilege last year of addressing a conference of Senior Girl Scouts who had spent several days discussing, with experts, every vocation open to them except the one most of them are going to spend the next twenty or thirty years doing.

Our culture seems to be saying that the action is outside of the home: there is little significance in cleaning, cooking and changing diapers. And I think it's time for responsible voices to didsent.

There is nothing more demanding, more challenging, potentially more creative than the vocation of homemaking and motherhood. The young mother in frustrated anguish trying to keep the children occupied because her husband is late for supper can rest assured that she's doing something more significant than her husband probably has done all day. Mothers of young children must be general practitioners in medical science, psychology, mathematics, chemistry; they must know some engineering, must serve as comforter, counsellor and arbiter - and most men wouldn't change jobs with them for all the money in the world.

The point is that mothers can see this - and live out of the self esteem that attaches to their role; or they can choose not to see it, be frustrated and not bring to their task the kind of sensitive intelligence it needs. Phyllis McGinley, the poetess laureate of the common housewife has summarized it well: "From the raw materials of four walls and a roof, a shelter over our heads, we will have made a home by force of our own personalities. We will have warmed, cheered and sustained the head of that house, turned progeny into a family. We will have learned a dozen skills and enjoyed the fruit of those skills. For us the baby will have taken the first step, repeated his first word.

We will have heard the school child call "Mommy" As soon as he puts a foot inside the door; not so much to have a reply as to be assured that he is safe, life is ordinary, and that we are there. We will have been raised to a dizzy eminence as final authority, dispenser of ujustice, necessary Presence. A husband, no matter how willingly he gives himself to the role of householder or parent, never approaches such triumphs. What more can one ask of a profession? God, as I said, must love housewives. It is time we also learned to love ourselves." (Sixpence in Her Shoe, p. 14)

Now, there are other things to be said, of course. A homemaker has a responsibility to engage herself outside her home. She is free to serve her community - to pursue her interests. In fact, a very crucial time comes in every woman's life when the children are gone and a terrible freedom sets in. An amazing amount of emotional problems and divorces occur at precisely that point. So it becomes a matter of responsibility not to narrow the field so much that a person shrivels and dies.

In addition, fathers are parents too. Our New Testament lesson was written out of a clearly defined Patriarchal society. In a sense, the pendulum has swung to the opposite pole. The head of the family, in many cases, and for a variety of reasons, is not the father at all - but the mother. I would hope that one might understand that together we are parents - equally responsible for the vocation of homemaking and parenthood.

We are, psycholgists tell us, the most significant individuals in the lives of our children. What they become is going to depend, in an frightening degree, upon our relationship with them. Boy babies begin to learn what it means to be men - as soon as they are born: - because tests have shown that fathers

handle their infant sons in an entirely different manner than they cuddle their daughters. We need to understand that. We need to know that we are totally transparent to our children - that what we do, or don't do with them is a powerful factor in their developing personalities. A child's attitudes about sex are going to reflect the manner in which the subject was handled at home. If he is made to feel ashamed of his sexuality - that his body is something to be hidden and ignored: if he learns that his questions embarass his parents and are studiously diverted - he's going to carry into adulthood a certain attitude about sexuality that may never be corrected.

If he hears his father refer to those niggers or that dirty Jew - he's learning. If he hears his parents expressing hatred for a neighbor - he's learning. If he observes another family praying before meals, and notices the absence of the ritual in his own home - he's learning. If he is taught to be honest and observes his parents living dishonest - he's learning. It happens in simple, ordinary, everyday ways. If your child answers the phone and you instruct him to tell whoever is calling that you are out, you might as well save your breath when you feel called to deliver a lecture on honesty.

We need to be reminded, perhaps daily, that our relationship with our children transcends all the other experiences they are having. We need to be reminded that our parenthood is the most difficult of all vocations.

And we need to be reminded that our ability to be effective parents depends in large measure on our relationship with each other as husbands and wives.

St. Paul writing to the Ephesians had some very straightforward words here. And perhaps it is no accident that he remained a bachelor. As I mentioned before he spoke from a culture that was clearly patriarchal. "Wives - be subject to your husbands." That culture is no more. But his understanding of the relationship between men and women in the home was firmly grounded in the realistic

appraisal of the human condition. That is, St. Paul "told it like it is,"

"Be subject to one another." That's where it begins. The New Testament writers called it Sin, and they were talking about that insidious egotism in every one of us that makes us put ourselves at the center of the universe and makes us elevate ourselves even above those we profess to love. That universal human selfishness makes marriage a contest, a battle of wills -- or an environment in which two people simply use each other for their own purposes.

He said, "Be subject one another," and what he meant was that each partner in a marriage must [illegible] and love enough to put their needs and individual [illegible] second to the other person's needs. We give it up and become part of a new unity -- a oneness that both celebrates and recognizes and respects the individuality of each person, which our Lord Christ died to build.

I wish I knew where to start, but I guess it doesn't matter with it in bed. For what it is worth, I suggest we start by simply and unashamedly asking to receive the [illegible] -- Love, reconciliation, forgiveness, -- Vocation.

We have been given a very special responsibility -- a high calling -- a call to ministry -- and it is our privilege to pass on to our children. Let's begin simply by remembering the importance of this vocation.

Let's accept it, with humility, acknowledging that it demands every resource we can muster -- plus a little of God's good grace.

Amen.

O God, for we have learned to call Mother, help us in the tasks of parenting. Give us wisdom and sensitivity. Give us the strength to love without counting the cost. Grant us openness with our wives and husbands -- and draw us ever closer to that perfect unity -- for which you have created us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.